

Youth Incarceration:  
Components of the Carceral State

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## **Introduction**

In recent years, the rate of youth incarceration in California has been declining. However, those who are still being incarcerated are disproportionately black, indigenous, children of color (BICOC). What you will see later in the paper is that the U.S. education system is a component that historically has led many BICOC to the carceral state. When thinking about education, common thoughts favor the idea that this system is meant to liberate and free minds to explore and interact with the world; Schools are places for children/youth to grow and learn with the guidance and support of helpful adults. With that in mind, the U.S. public education system was not designed to educate BICOC in this idealistic way. Since its introduction to the lives of BICOC, schools were not designed to help them. Rather than institutions of education, it is more accurate to see public schools as preludes to the carceral state; Where punishment and punitive ways of maneuvering are used to achieve goals. The paper proceeds as follows: First, a primer to the history of BICOC in the education system, we will examine the ways segregation, desegregation, and integration happened for different groups of BICOC throughout history. It focuses on the idea that public schools were not meant to teach these children. Secondly, we will draw connections to the history, using current examinations of the relationship between BICOC and the school system to explain how the history of the two leads to today's relationships. Applying theories and statistics to help paint for you (the reader) an understanding of the realities in school settings for BICOC. Third, we will investigate the resulting experiences of BICOC who are at the receiving end of all the policies. Giving light to how the lack of care for the students creates gaps in their development where alternative lifestyles and influences can fill

instead. Drawing out how this leads many of them to the carceral state and from then on into very damaging cycles.

Throughout U.S. history, the worth of BICOC has been determined through education; their access to it (or lack thereof), the type of education, and the quality of it. In the years 1869 to 1926, 83% of school-age Native American children were put into U.S. boarding schools (Adams 1995). The U.S. educational institution sought their mission to “civilize” the native children. In their process of carving out boarding schools, the U.S. government forcibly removed Native American children from their homes and families. This also included orphans who lost their families to colonialization. The said goal was to “civilize” the children, however, the apparent goal was to prompt erasure of the Native way of living and exploit their children into obedience. The schools were created to educate the children enough on the basic needed functions of the growing U.S. economy. For young boys, their education was centered around, “‘ mental and physical discipline and training as will render useful in future years,’ which would continue to mean for the boys ‘a thorough knowledge of all kinds of farm work’” (Burich 2016). The boys that were 10 or older would work half days working (forcibly) at local farms. During the summertime, when school was not in session, the young Native boys were sold to local farms where they worked all day. As for the girls, their education revolved around housework: “... well trained in a variety of housework, baking, cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing...” (Burich 2016). The girls -- like the boys -- at age 10 were made to knit and sew clothing all year in addition to both being the school's janitors, maintenance, groundskeepers, and lunch people. There is no tangible way the U.S. wanted children who they viewed as “savages” to have access to the same education as white kids.

The Native American child's education was never intended for their well-being and growth; it was a means to exploit their developing minds into submission and subordination.

This form of education continued well into the later development of the nation. In 1915 California, 80% of the school children actively segregated were Latino children. In response, families brought upon grievances to a local school district in Southern California. They claimed that the schools were situated in run-down buildings with teachers who were not qualified and had crowded classrooms compared to the Anglo schools in the same district (Flemming 2001). Anglo children were taught several topics like math, English, science, etc. Whereas Latino children were taught labor skills. The superintendent of the Santa Ana School District in 1915 stated that Latino schools learned "... sewing and mending for the girls, and manual training for the boys, better habits of living for both. The manual training for the boys has taken varied lines of activity, such as carpentry, repairing shoes, basketry, hair cutting, and blacksmithing" (Gonzalez 1985). Not much had changed when it came to the education of BICOC, as we saw with the education of Native children and then the transition to Latino children. The said goal of segregation in schools was to prove a "separate but equal" framework. Unsurprisingly, there was nothing equal about this proposed set up. While white children were taught tangible skills and given chances to advance through the U.S. education system – BICOC under this same system were turned down for this opportunity. This form of discrimination was at the forefront of U.S. education up until *Brown v. Board* "made away" with segregation in U.S. schools. The way in which BICOC were seen/valued in schools, however, did not change. The demeanor towards the children worsened in the public eye.

The famous photo of Elizabeth Eckford, walking to school in Little Rock, Arkansas while being tormented by a mob of angry white people is one of the most telling photographs taken during the desegregation of schools. In the U.S. Eckford, was hailed as an icon in the movement, yet Eckford was only 15 years old at the time of the photograph. I had the pleasure of meeting Miss Eckford in 2017. The cohort that I was with were instructed not to clap for her when she walked into the room as she has immense PTSD from her time spent being tormented for being black in the desegregation of schools. The treatment of a young black girl in the desegregation of U.S. school, was traumatizing enough to scare away the sound of claps well into Ms. Eckford's later years. They allowed and still allow BICOC to sit at the same tables as white children. But this does not mean that BICOC have equal access to education the same way white students do. BICOC historically, have never had the same access to education and care that white students did.

The history of the U.S. education system in relation to BICOC is what the current U.S. education system is built upon. A system that historically has seen BICOC as expendable, and not deserving of quality education. BICOC were never given an opportunity to achieve their potential by equitable means, instead they were recruited for their labor and exploitation or just left to fend for themselves. The creation of schools for Indian children, segregation, and desegregation were choices to not provide available quality education to BICOC.

A recent look into U.S. public schools proves that history is still etched into everyday mechanics. BICOC are still seen as being of lesser value than their white counterparts. An unmistakable piece of evidence lies in how disciplinary measures pertain to BICOC.

School policies like zero tolerance, are a set of strict rules that enforce unwanted behavior. Other policies like exclusions from school communal experiences, such as dances, football games, or even their graduation are examples of the continued segregation in school systems. With the extreme but all too common school expulsion lingering around the corner. All perpetuate the idea that students must earn their freedoms and experiences, while being put into a category of either “good” or “bad.” This, in partnership with zero tolerance, leaves no room for improvement for the youth. School discipline unsurprisingly is disproportionately felt by BICOC It starts as early as preschool, where black students make up 18% of all preschoolers in the U.S., and 48% of preschool expulsions. For reference, preschoolers are ages 3-5. In their high school years, black students make up 16% of all students suspended, compared to 5% of white student suspensions (Department of Education 2014). Dr. Duncan-Andrade states that schools perpetuate “a culture of false caring.” Schools claim to want the best for their students but seem to have a sense of idleness when it comes to providing equitable opportunities for young BICOC. A representation of this is nonexistent programs or poorly funded out of school time activities for BICOC. After school time is crucial, as this is where students have full autonomy for unsupervised, unchecked potentially toxic or dangerous behavior. Learning Across all Settings theory states that learning is more than just in the classroom, and engagement goes far beyond the time window for schools (Banks 2006). Utilizing before or after school time to engage children/youth in programs that help them feel connected to the community; things like sports team, clubs, home ec. classes, after school care, or local community get togethers all teach children important and tangible lessons that can be applied to the child’s development. The education system has opportunities to

use this model to navigate student success and safety in environments that support their belonging and own social/economic mobility. As well as programs and opportunities for them to engage with their communities, as an alternative to potentially deviant activities. However, this model is hardly encouraged or fostered for system impacted youth for one excuse or another. Instead of offering interventions or programs to encourage healthy ways of living/engaging with the world. Schools bring in predatory programs that target low-income BICOC. Military recruiters were stationed at my low-income community high school at least twice a month. My fellow classmates' and I's experience is not an isolated one. The RAND Corporation study tells that nearly 57% of the student recruits at public high schools with these stationed military recruiters relied on the free or reduced lunch program (Goldman & Schewig 2017). The students who are dependent on the free or reduced across the nation are demographically, 38% Latino, 37% Black, 30% Indigenous American, and 23% Pacific Islander. Students holding the lowest amount of eligibility were White students at 7% (National Center for Education Statistics 2023). Comparing the data, there is a targeted approach happening with the recruitment of BICOC students into the military through their school system. The Learning Across all Settings model aims to uplift students in their connections to learning throughout different settings. A space is predatorily held for military recruiters to entice system-impacted youth to enlist with promises of great pay and benefits. BICOC run up against having little to no impactful/meaningful programming throughout their education, instead, they get fed to the U.S. military system or other predatory programs. The practice of seeing BICOC as expendable is adjacent to the history of exploitation that schools embedded in these young people 60+ years ago. This does

not leave much space for BICOC to promote a healthy way of living, especially in after school time frames.

Youth take alternative approaches to finding a sense of belonging as a result of not having that support from schools. Social Development Theory explains that children primarily learn by observing others. Their actions mirror the actions of those around them and will build a sense of understanding for themselves through these actions (How Social Learning Theory Works in Education 2022). One side of this coin is seeing how schools treat BICOC under policies like zero tolerance. The students will gain a better understanding that they are either “good or bad.” If the school's behavior and treatment of them is set on them being a “bad” student, then this is the narrative they will likely believe. The other side of the coin is BICOC youth are more susceptible to associating with fellow students/community members who live this same reality; the so-called “bad” kids. From a criminological understanding: the youth can learn deviant behaviors from this cohort through differential association (Mooney 2020), where the interactions held between deviant social groups connected to the susceptible youth, teach an alternative set of values, motives, and attitudes to dealing with systemic problems. Unfortunately, what we see far too commonly in BICOC who have these lived experience(s) are run ins with the carceral state. Schools foster an unforgiving environment like these justice systems. Touching base again with schools zero tolerance policies through this lens, it mirrors the verbiage used with President Nixon’s war on drugs. A strict “no tolerance,” point of view to disorderly conduct also disproportionately impacted BIPOC in adulthood. Schools not only mirror the justice system’s policies, but also their designs.





(Josphrtz 2014).

Cold industrial designs like the one above mimic prison walls. Throughout teachings of child development, there is an important role that environmental design plays in a child's willingness to engage and participate meaningfully (Widiastuti 2020). If prisons in the U.S. were designed to punish and to reduce quality of life for the prisoners, it is curious to see why schools choose similar designs. School guards additionally mimic the authoritative panopticon prison guards hold over prisoners. The relationship is similar as well, African American children represent about 15% of all students in the U.S., and also represent 31% of students with law enforcement referrals and arrests (Girvan 2019). U.S. schools are early like the prisons and mimic many of the same words and actions as such.

community that values them, many youths turn to delinquency as a form of protest against their assigned values. Leaving them vulnerable to the justice system. In 2021, 2/3 or 67% of the population at juvenile detention centers were BICOC. Of the total 265,600 children arrested, 1 in 3 were Black (Dawson 2023). The majority of crimes committed by youth were misdemeanors, one of the lowest levels of crime. 7% of BICOC arrested were arrested for felony charges. Once the youth have entered the juvenile justice system, they risk being exposed to more dangerous life paths and alliances. The conditions of juvenile detention centers strip their liberties away and cause them to completely believe the “bad kid” narrative that was pushed on them at schools. With the mixture of this and many other elements, BICOC are vulnerable to becoming recidivists. Data collected from 39 states that collect youth recidivism data tells that 84% percent of youth re-offend and end up again in the justice system. An estimated 40% of those who reoffend end up at adult prisons and jails. Their future becomes a lot murkier once they enter the adult justice system.

The U.S. is failing our BICOC. The relationship U.S. education has with BICOC are leading them to being intertwined with the carceral state. Historically, BICOC were never supposed to receive the same educational support and guidance their white counterparts had. The goals schools had for BICOC since the beginning was completely contrary to what the intended purpose of schools is. With this in mind, youth come face to face with the aftermath of all of this; having to deal with a system that is constantly out to get them.

Whether it be through zero tolerance, school conditioning for punitive treatment or military recruitment, BICOC don't feel like they belong. Due to feeling this way, they will reach alternative and unconventional ways of belonging. This grey area, is where youth fall victim to influences and end up being targetted by the carceral state. Either with the aid of schools, or on their own in their community. Schools were not made to include BICOC, and because of that, they are pushed into the carceral state.

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